A NIGHT OUT

EDWARD PEPLE

PROPERTY
ALPHA TAU OMEGA

Heightstown

9849

To my good friend
Major Alfred J. Stofer.
Dec. 25, 1924
H. E. E. Bryant

A NIGHT OUT

"The Beast has had the time of his life."

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BY

EDWARD PEPLE

Frontispiece by
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NEW YORK
MOFFAT, YARD AND COMPANY
MCMXXI

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Published, November, 1909
Thirteenth Printing, March, 1915
Fifteenth Printing, August, 1916
Sixteenth Printing, February, 1917
Seventeenth Printing, September, 1917
Eighteenth Printing, February, 1918
Nineteenth Printing, June, 1919

A NIGHT OUT

I

Omar Ben Sufi was a cat. This unadorned statement would have wounded Omar Ben to the marrow of his pride, for he chanced to be a splendid tiger-marked feline of purest Persian breed, with glorious yellow eyes and a Solomon-in-all-his-glory tail. His pedigree could be traced directly back to Padisha Zim Yuki Yowsi Zind—a dignity, in itself, sufficient to cause an aristocratic languor; but, to the layman, he was just a cat.

He dwelt with an exclusive family of humans in a little eighty-

thousand-dollar cottage on the outskirts of vulgarity—which is to say, the villa was situated near enough to town to admit of marketing, but far enough removed therefrom to escape the clatter of plebeian toil and the noxious contact with the unhealthy, unwealthy herd. Here the humans entertained selected friends who came at the ends of weeks to admire the splendor of Omar Ben's tail, to bow down to the humans' money, and to hate them fiercely because they had it.

The master did not toil. He lived, for certain hours of the day, in Wall Street, where he sank his

patrician fingers into the throats of lesser men, squeezed them dry, then washed his hands in violet water, and built a church. True, he did not attend this church himself, but he built it; otherwise his neighbors might have been deprived of the opportunity of praising God.

Omar Ben had a French maid all to himself—a perky little human with a quasi-kinship to the feline race—who combed him and brushed him and slicked him down and gave him endless, mortifying baths. Also, she tied lavender bows about his neck, and fed him from Dresden china on minute

particles of flaked fish and raw sirloin, with a dessert of pasteurized cream.

In the rear of the eighty-thousand-dollar cottage there was a thirty-thousand-dollar flower-garden—an oppressively clean garden, where the big Jack-roses were as immaculate as a "mama's Lizzie-boy," and the well-bred, timid little violets seemed to long to play in the dirt, yet dared not because of the master-rule of "form." And here the clean cat used to sun himself in the clean garden, thinking his clean thoughts and perishing of *ennui* clean through.

Then, one day, from the vulgar

outer world came an unclean incident.

Omar Ben became conscious of an uproar beyond the garden wall. It embraced a whimper of canine hope, a spitting taunt, and the patter of flying paws; then, suddenly, on the top of the high brick wall appeared a cat. The newcomer paused an instant to fling an obscene *au revoir* at the raging, disappointed dog, dropped carelessly down into a geranium-bed, and took his bearings.

He was not a patrician. Omar Ben eyed him in a sort of wondering awe. The stranger was a long-barreled, rumple-furred, devil-

clawed street arab, of a caste—or no-caste—that battles for existence with the world—and beats it. On his tail were rings of missing fur, suggesting former attachments, not of lady friends, but of tin cans and strings. For further assets, he possessed one eye and a twisted smile. His present total liability lay in the dog beyond the wall, so the arab wasn't so badly fixed, after all. Besides, he owned property. It consisted of a bullfrog which he carried in his mouth, with its legs and web feet protruding in wriggly, but unavailing, protest.

To breathe the better, the street

cat dropped his frog and set one mangy paw upon it; then, suddenly, he spied the Persian.

"Hello, bo!" he observed cheerfully. "Didn't see yer. Did yer pipe me chase wid de yelper? Dat stilt-legged son of a saw-toothed tyke has had his nose on me rudder-post fer more'n a mile."

The Persian made no answer, and the arab continued, unabashed:

"It's a hunch dat I could 'a' clawed de stuffin's outer him, but I didn't want fer to lose me lunch. Say! Wot's yer name?"

Omar Ben regarded the interloper with the same glance of refined surprise that the master

might have employed when a fleeced plebeian entered his office, demanding to know why the market had slumped in direct contradiction to confidential prophecy. He elevated his patrician brows, but gave the desired information politely:

"My ribbon-name is Omar Ben Sufi, first-born of the second litter of Yiki Zootra and Sultana Yaggi Kiz. Here at home, however, I am known by a variety of others, such as *Mon Prince de Manière Charmante*, Sugar-pie-precious, and—"

"Aw, cut it!" snapped the street cat disgustedly. "Dem

ain't no decent names! D'ey's positive ridick'lous! *Mine's* Ringtail Pete, but me frien's has reasons fer fergittin' de tail part of it when dey names me to me face—see?"

He smiled his twisted smile, raised one paw, and regarded its claws with a sort of humorous pride.

The Persian cat said nothing. Ringtail Pete was obviously an undesirable acquaintance; therefore Omar Ben held his tongue, and became interested in the bullfrog. Curiosity, however, conquered refined reserve.

"What is it?" he asked presently.

"Frawg," said the street cat, with laconic candor, as he gracefully mauled the subject of discussion. "I gets 'em over to the frawg-pawnd up back of Lumkins's tannery. Have a piece?"

"Thank you, no," returned the Persian, with a faint smile of his own. "I've just had luncheon."

Pete shrugged his gaunt shoulders, murdered the frog, and prepared to dispose of it permanently. Omar Ben edged closer. In spite of his polite refusal, the frog fascinated him. Never in all his benighted life had he tasted one morsel which had not been prepared for him on dainty china; but now

it was different. Across the geranium-bed came a strange, alluring scent—a scent which roused the memory of inheritance—a memory well-nigh washed out of him, and his sire before him, by the bottle-pap of luxury. A memory it was of wild things, to be killed—a blood-lust memory—and now at last it woke in a pampered, velvet-hearted cat.

Ringtail Pete was conscious of the other's wistful look, and laughed; for his battle with life had taught him generosity.

"Say, bo, yer don't want to do de bashful—see?—'cause me 'n'

you is gents what understands de game er chanst. Here—take holt an' chaw yerse'f off a hunk!"

The aristocrat hesitated, then slid down one rung on the ladder of degradation—pushed by blood-lust and by the strange compelling *camaraderie* of an arab of the streets. It was wrong, he knew, but then there was a certain flavor in this wrong; so, gingerly, he crossed the geranium-bed, took one web foot firmly between his teeth, and wondered at the thrill of life that sparked and snapped along his spine. Then Pete and Omar Ben tugged and tugged,

till the clean geranium-bed was a comfortable, wholesome wreck.

"Hully gee!" grinned Ringtail Pete. "We otter make a wish!"

They made it, and the metaphoric wish-bone parted with a jerk, Omar Ben rolling upon his lordly back in the healthy dirt; but he rose and devoured his frog-leg to its smallest bone, wishing with all his heart that the frog had been a bigger frog. Then he licked his chops and looked in admiration on his worldly friend.

"Thank you, *so* much," he began, but the arab waved formality aside.

"Aw, 't wan't nuttin'," he de-

clared, "an' dey tastes a darn sight better when yer wades fer 'em. Say! Look-a-here! You meet me to-night on de top er dis here wall, an' I'll learn yer how to wade fer frawgs."

"Oh, dear!" began the Persian, trembling at the very mention of the outer world. "Really, Mr. Pete, I—really—"

"Punk!" cut in the arab, dismissing the protest with a switch of his mutilated tail. "I won't take 'naw' fer a answer; an' dis here's de way fer to jump yer wealthy crib. You watch me!"

He backed away, then took a running start and made the coping

of the wall in a splendid, scurrying rush, amid a shower of scattered ivy-leaves. On the top he turned and called to the wondering aristocrat:

"Jes' wait fer me an' de moon, me son, an' dontcher fergit dat frawgs is frawgs!"

Once more he smiled his twisted smile, and was gone into the vulgar outer world. He had not waited for a promise from his friend, for Pete was wise in his little hour of life and left the keeping of a tryst with the honor of a gentleman.

II

As for Omar Ben, he sat in the healthy grime of the garden soil, his mind a prey to the poison of glittering promises, till suddenly a human fell upon him with an absurd French shriek and bore him away to the lap of comfort and a scented bath.

In the bath he yowled; and wept when another lavender bow was tied about his neck; and yet, had Mlle. Frenchy observed him carefully, she might have caught him smiling.

All day long he dozed and

dreamed—dreamed of the vulgar world beyond the wall—for now it seemed to his pampered soul that the pole star of an earthly cat's desire was "frawgs."

At the humans' dinner-time he scorned their expensive fare and sneaked away into the shadows of the garden to wait for Ringtail Pete and the rising of the moon. It rose; and, as it peeped above the wall, there also rose a cautious signal-wail, and Pete's one eye glowed green among the ivy-vines.

"Hi, spote!" grinned the owner of the eye, as Omar Ben clawed his way to a perch beside him. "Yer clumb dat wall in a way dat

make me proud. Now, den, we're off!"

They dropped into the outer world. Omar Ben was trembling somewhat, but tried his best to conceal the mortifying fact, and presently he conquered it. After walking for a quarter of a mile along a country road, they approached the outskirts of the town and began to cross it, employing unfrequented paths. They traversed an alley, black and reeking with nightly smells, pausing at last on the verge of a lighted street whence rose the sound of human mirth, bits of vulgar song, and the barking of vagrant dogs.

"S-h-h-h!" cautioned Ringtail. "You wait till I counts to t'ree, den make a rush fer de alley acrost de street—see?"

"But, why?" asked Omar Ben, wondering.

Pete sniffed in scorn of the uninitiated.

"Well, nemmine why! You do like I tells yer, or yer'll git yer eggercation wid a brick. Now den! One—two—t'ree! Hump it, bo!"

They humped it, making the other alley's mouth by a margin slim indeed, followed by human howls and a clattering volley of sticks and stones.

"Good gracious!" the Persian gasped, as they streaked through the alley's filth. "What *are* they?"

"Boys," grinned Pete. "De town is gittin' fair congested wid 'em. But 'tain't nuttin', son; it's jes' a part er de game er life. Come on."

The way was easier now, and they journeyed without alarm. Presently Ringtail turned to his friend with his twisted smile:

"Yer see dat lady settin' on de gate-post? Well, dat's me steady. I'll interjuce yer in a minute."

The lady in question was a thin, dirty white cat with bold

eyes and a brazen bearing, and Omar Ben was doubtful of her caste.

"Thank you," he murmured non-committally, and hurried on; but the meeting was unavoidable, for the lady crossed the street and stood directly in his path.

"Hi, Mame!" said Pete, in cordial greeting. "Shake hands wid me friend, Mr.—er—aw hell! Shake hands wid bo!"

Omar Ben had never seen a lady-cat, and his ideal of the sex was something modest and retiring. Miss Mame was not retiring. She greeted her friend's friend without the courtesy of a "Mr.," looked in

open admiration at the handsome gentleman, and asked if he were single.

The aristocrat murmured a commonplace and edged away. At the slight the lady took umbrage, spat warningly, and showed her claws, till Ringtail averted trouble by a generous display of tact.

"Now, don't git phony, Mame!" he remarked in a gentle whisper. "De gent's all right, but he's young, dat's all, an' I'm goin' to learn him—see? You chase aroun' fer Lizzie, an' if de goil ain't got no udder date, yer kin meet us here 'bout moondown,

an' we'll bring yer a brace er frawgs. So long, Mame! Remember dat I loves yer!"

With a partly mollified sniff, the lady retired to her gate-post, and the two adventurers went on. They came to the evil-smelling tannery, and to the frog-pond just behind it, stretching cold and still in the moonlight, and covered with a noxious, slimy scum. It was horribly different from the Persian's usual baths, but, once in he forgot its chill in the lust of the hunt.

They waded and swam and scrambled along the shore, Ringtail pointing out that frogs were

wont to crouch close down by the water's edge in the shadow of some bush or vine.

"Dere's one!" he whispered suddenly. "Now, sneak up, son, an' grab 'im!"

Quivering with suppressed excitement, Omar Ben sneaked, but mistook the especial frog to which his friend had reference. Instead, he pounced upon a big yellow-throated beast weighing a pound and a half, and known colloquially as a "sockdolliger" or a "joogger-room." There followed a scuffling rush, a grunt, a startled yowl, and a swirl of water; then Omar Ben came up coughing, minus his frog,

but plus an overcoat of mud and disappointment.

"Great snakes!" yelled Pete. "Ain't yer got no gumption 't all? Ef I had knowed yer wanted ter eat a cow, I'd 'a' took you up to de slaughter-house! Go fer de little ones, bo. Yer don't gain nuttin' by bein' a hawg. Take it from me—it's straight!"

"Bo" went for the little ones. He had learned his lesson of experience, and profited thereby. He made his virgin kill and devoured it, squatting in the muddy pond, while around him rose the voices of the wild things of the night; and never had morsel tasted

sweeter to his pampered tongue. And so the hunt went on, a never-to-be-forgotten hunt, when crawfish nipped their tails, when insects preyed upon their eyes, and they dripped with the sweat of joyful toil; then, presently, the friends stretched out upon the bank, weary and replete.

"Say, bo," said Ringtail, after a restful pause, "what do yer say to a nip?"

"A nip?" asked Omar Ben in astonishment. "What kind of a nip?"

"W'y, a catnip, yer bloomin' bladderskite! Wot did yer t'ink I meant—a cornder of de moon?

I'm talkin' 'bout jes' straight catnip. Are you on?"

"Yes, certainly," returned the Persian gravely. "I am on!"

On the homeward way they turned into a lane and came to a clump of catnip. True, Omar Ben had tasted the herb before, but dry and in five-cent packages, which was different from the pure article direct from nature's still and exuding its sharp, intoxicating breath. Pete and Omar fell upon it greedily, rolled upon it, wallowed among the scattered leaves, and chewed and chewed till their senses swam in a spirit-dance of ecstasy. Then, after a nap, the two reeled

homeward down the road, Pete smiling his twisted smile, and Omar Ben Sufi wrapped in the comforting belief that he was singing tunefully.

"Say, R. T.," the Persian chuckled happily, "what did you say was the name of your lady friend's other lady friend?"

"Lizzie," answered Ringtail, astounded at the tone of familiarity; "an' take it from me she's white!"

"In color, do you mean?"

"Naw—in disposition. Outside, she's kind of striped, but inside, de lady's white; an' don't

yer fergit it, bo, she's de owner of four good sets of claws."

"Thank you," said Omar Ben airily. "I shall endeavor to remember. Come along, R. T.!"

Pete objected somewhat to this pointed abbreviation of his name, but forgave his friend on the grounds that he was drunk; so the two went on and sought their rendezvous. The ladies were waiting, seated expectantly on the gate-posts, but descended at Ringtail's call, and the "swell gent" was formally introduced. Miss Lizzie seemed to like him immensely, and the two progressed so well that Ringtail stretched his

single eye to its utmost capacity, cursing softly at his friend's unprecedented cheek. For Omar Ben—thanks to his nip of catnip—so far forgot his strained reserve that Miss Lizzie herself said afterward to a friend, in confidence :

"I never *see* sech a *forward* gent sence me 'n' you was a couple er half-way-drownded kits!"

The flirtation, however, was short-lived, for suddenly, without an instant's warning, Miss Lizzie, Miss Mame, and Pete himself went clawing up a water-pipe to a convenient roof above, while down the street came floating a shrill, defiant yowl.

"Chase yerse'f, bo!" called Pete in a voice of fear. "It's Ash-Can Sam!"

Now, Ash-Can Sam had a reputation of his own, as every cat in the neighborhood could testify with sorrow and with tears. He weighed eleven pounds. He kept himself in training; and, where others lived for love or wealth or art, Ash-Can Sam existed for a finish fight alone. At the present speaking he came swaggering around a corner, and paused in astonishment at the sight of a stranger sitting in the middle of the street. The insolence of it! It was past belief!

"Oh, please, Mr. Bo!" wailed Lizzie, wringing her paws as she perched upon the roof. "Do hurry while youse has got de chanst! He'll rip you somethin' terrible! For *my* sake, dearie, *won't* you slope?"

"No, not upon your life!" called Omar Ben gravely. "I will not demean myself by retreating from any cat alive."

This statement was fat with brave audacity, but lean in the matter of discretion; so Pete leaned down with one last friendly whisper of appeal:

"W'y, you chowder-headed ass,

he'll make yer look like a moth-et flannel shirt! *Beat it!*"

The patrician declined to "beat it," and Ash-Can Sam edged a little closer, wearing a dissolute, wicked leer of joy. He circled slowly round the stranger cat, eying Omar Ben's glossy coat and humming a sort of vulgar chant:

Ain't it a sham-m-m-m-e!
To chaw up mommer's sugar-pet,
An' hurt his nose, not soon, but yet.
Oh, ain't it a sham-m-m-m-e!

Omar Ben regarded the bully in calm scorn. "You disreputable beast," he said, "shut up!"

Sam, in no uncertain terms, stated his unwillingness to shut

up, and the conversation became personal.

"Yer blink-eyed yard er silk, I'm a goin' to turn you cat-out-the-skin an' sell yer tail fer a fancy dustin'-brush!"

"Bosh! You'd run from a pet canary."

"You're a liar!"

"You're another!"

"So's yer pa an' so's yer mother!"

"Pfst! Zzz-i-ttt! Y-eo-w!" And the battle was on.

"Oh, dear!" mewed Lizzie tearfully. "An' Mr. Bo was sech a easy-mannered gent'man, too!"

Sub-consciously, she was already referring to the foolish Persian in

the past tense; yet, in view of probable results, and in the stress of such violent circumstance, her anti-mortem sorrow might at least be pardoned.

Omar Ben had never had a fight, and yet the memory of inheritance had waked within him, revealing other traits besides his yearning for debauchery and "frawgs"; so now he squared himself and uncurled his velvet toes.

Ash-Can Sam crouched low and came in with a headlong rush. Omar Ben side-stepped and raked him with a stiffly extended paw. It was a good rake, and there was fur upon his claws—and blood.

"Hully gee!" breathed Pete into Mame's convenient ear. "Did yer pipe de way bo upper-cut 'im? Gee!"

Ash-Can Sam was wounded—not so much in body as in pugilistic pride. He turned to wipe away the stain, and, incidentally, to wipe the earth with the body of a foreign cat. This time he came in, swearing, and the two cats reared upon their haunches with the shock; then fell in a tangled, rending, yowling snarl. Omar Ben, by instinctive craft, sought for a point of vantage underneath his foe—a vantage because, when lying on his back, he could claw straight up

with all four feet, and the greater the weight of the chap on top, the greater his woe—abdominally.

This point of vantage, however, is rather difficult to hold, with two most earnest gentlemen desirous of it; and so they changed positions—changed so rapidly, in fact, that their bodies resembled a sort of pyrotechnic pinwheel whose centrifugal sparks were composed of eyes and claws and tufts of fur and cat profanity. Also, it lasted longer than the ordinary pinwheel, and was a trifle more uproarious; but it died at last with a sizzling spit, and a lean black streak shot out toward the haven of an alley's mouth.

The streak was Ash-Can Sam. Omar Ben Sufi sat down in the middle of the street, and wondered. He had thrashed something, and he didn't understand it. So he just sat there, quivering, bleeding, battered—but a conqueror.

Ringtail Pete endeavored to express himself, but emotion choked him; therefore he spat fervidly and said:

"Hully gee!"

Then he and the ladies descended from the roof, to walk in silent circles around the champion, regarding him with a species of cataleptic awe. Presently, however, Pete

came to earth, extended his paw, and delivered himself of an established truth:

"Well, dang my hide, but it takes er 'ristercrat fer to glitter in a scrap!"

They escorted him all the way to his eighty-thousand-dollar home. The ladies kissed him—both of them—and helped him to clamber weakly over his garden wall.

He turned to Ringtail with an easy, aristocratic smile: "*Au revoir*, R. T.! Those frawgs were most delicious!"

"Hully gee!" breathed Pete, and disappeared through the dusk of the outer world.

III

Now, in the eighty-thousand-dollar cottage black sorrow reigned throughout the night. There were tears and linguistic prayers. There were tinklings of little bells, while humans called shrilly to vulgar officials along the wires. From a mass of incoherence the officials learned that some evil-hearted ruffian had entered the thirty-thousand-dollar garden and had stolen a priceless cat.

Thus the outer world went hunting. So great was its zeal—so great was the offer of reward—that it captured every cat in town,

with the one exception, of course, of Omar Ben Sufi. This particular hero was found next morning, asleep, in the geranium-bed; so they bore him in, while weepings burst forth afresh. And well they might.

Poor Omar Ben was a sight to awaken pity, even in the stoniest of hearts. The number of his hairs could be counted, almost, by plus and minus tufts; one eye was closed; his splendid tail was bent in several angles unrecognized by the rules of art, and he smelled of the outer world—horribly.

His mistress expressed her grief in a noiseless, refined whimper of de-

spair; the French maid shrieked, and called on Heaven to witness the devastation of her every hope; but the master—who had lived, in spite of his Wall Street training—laughed.

"Nonsense!" said he. "You are squandering your sympathies upon a shameless prodigal. The beast has had the time of his life, by George!"

"Oh, Charles, how *can* you?" wailed the mistress of the priceless cat. "Can't you see how the precious child is suffering?"

Again the master laughed—laughed brutally.

"Of course he's suffering, my dear—but look at the smile on him!"

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